

# What's the 'cut money' that Bengal is angry about?

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NEW DELHI: Amidst allegations of corruption against the West Bengal government, the new word trending in the state's politics is 'cut money'. As BJP corners the government on cut money, CM Mamata Banerjee has inadvertently admitted to corruption in the ruling Trinamool Congress. But what is cut money and how does it qualify to be categorised under corruption?

Cut money is the unofficial commission charged by local politicians for getting government grants for local area projects approved — so named for the 'cut' of the total money given by the government department.

So for instance, if the government releases Rs 100 toward financing a particular project, the local area politician, who many times are elected representatives, will take, say, Rs 25, as 'charges' for helping get the grant. This cut is shared all the way up from the lowest grassroots level politician to the senior most in the ruling party's food chain. Is it official?

Not at all, but since when did that stop anything. The cut is usually taken in cash, to prevent any records of the

money coming on the taxman's radar. Given that funds released for a project run into several crore, the cut money from a single project could run into many lakh — as evident from the fact that an All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) booth president Trilochan Mukherjee returned over Rs 2.25 lakh cut money taken from 141 labourers from their eight months' wages.

Besides, it's not like the malaise is limited to just the AITC or West Bengal — a transparency international report last year revealed that bribery in India grew 11% in one year, with government officials of Punjab, MP and UP the most corrupt.

### Controversial cut

West Bengal chief minister and AITC founder Mamata Banerjee stirred a hornet's nest when last week, at a meeting with party workers, she warned them to return the cut money or get ready to go to jail.

The warning, a tacit admission of the corruption that has seeped in AITC, has also led to a lot of heartburn among the grassroots level workers who feel that they are being cornered to return their cut of the money while there's no word on the senior leaders of the party to whom a percentage of the cut was also given.

In fact, AITC MP Satabdi Roy criticised Banerjee's directive, saying that "a person who has taken cut money directly is only the front man. There are others who are behind him. They have also taken their share, so the money has to be returned according to this chain."

### The jam she caused

While Banerjee may have thought she was pre-empting an opposition move to nail her government on corruption, the legacy of cut money is believed to be a carry-over from the decades of Left party rule in the state.

Apart from the opposition — the Congress, the Left and the BJP — who have cornered the Banerjee government on the issue in the state assembly, locals across the state are coming out in protest demanding a return of the cut money. This has, in turn, created a law and order issue, forcing the police to ask protestors to file a police complaint against people who have taken cut money, in order to get a 'refund'.

The state police registering cases against the state's ruling party MLAs? That ought to be interesting!

Meanwhile, BJP MP Saumitra Khan, who raised the issue of cut money in the Lok Sabha on Thursday, sought an investigation into how much funds have gone into the chief minister and her family's account.